DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 975 EA 022 682

AUTHOR Thomas, R. Murray
TITLE Analyzing School Decentralization--The Case of New Zealand.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Change; Administrative Organization; Bureaucracy; *Change Strategies; Competence; *Decentralization; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Program Descriptions; Program Evaluation; *School Organization; School Responsibility; Staff Role; Staff Utilization
IDENTIFIERS *New Zealand

ABSTRACT

In October 1989, the government of New Zealand responded to results of a 1987-88 study on school management by passing legislation that shifted control of education from a central bureaucracy to local boards of trustees. Using a question-answer format, this document presents a model of the decentralization process as it analyzes the 1989 plan in terms of: (1) functions of the established centralized administrative system; (2) factors such as shortcomings of the existing centralized structure and anticipated improvements that motivated the decentralization proposal; (3) nature of the people involved with the decentralization issues; (4) competencies, facilities, and personnel needed for efficiently performing the desired administrative functions of the decentralization proposal; and (5) techniques to be used for evaluating the success of the decentralization plan. Included are two figures. (Author/CLA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED328975

Analyzing School Decentralization—
The Case of New Zealand

R. Murray Thomas

University of California, Santa Barbara

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Murray Thomas

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 022 682

ABSTRACT

**Analyzing School Decentralization—
The Case of New Zealand**

R. Murray Thomas
University of California, Santa Barbara

Public dissatisfaction with schooling in New Zealand led in 1987-1988 to a study of school management called the *Picot Report*. The Government's published response was entitled *Tomorrow's Schools*. These two documents resulted in legislation that shifted control of education from a central bureaucracy to local boards of trustees. The plan took effect in October 1989. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the decentralization plan in terms of: (1) functions of the established centralized administrative system that have been selected for decentralization, (2) factors motivating the decentralization proposal, (3) the nature of the people involved with the decentralization issues, (4) the competencies and facilities needed for efficiently performing the desired administrative functions of the decentralization proposal, and (5) techniques to be used for evaluating the success of the decentralization plan.

Analyzing School Decentralization—
The Case of New Zealand

The purpose of this paper is to offer a scheme for analyzing educational decentralization and to illustrate the application of the scheme with the case of New Zealand's 1989 decentralization plan.

The term *decentralization* implies the transfer of decision-making from a single agency to multiple agencies and from the core to the periphery of an education system. But hearing only that an education system has decentralized tells nothing about what actually occurred until we discover the answers to a series of questions. The questions represent a descriptive model, one intended to define the anatomy of the particular decentralization effort. Such a model permits a meaningful comparison of one decentralization plan and another.

The following presentation of the model begins with a brief overview of five facets of the decentralization process that subsume the series of questions which comprise the model. Then each issue is explained in greater detail and illustrated with material from the New Zealand case.

The contents of the New Zealand example have been drawn from four published sources: (1) the report of a taskforce assigned to conduct a nationwide review of how the education system was being administered (Picot, et al., 1988), (2) a booklet offering the government's response to the taskforce report (Lange, 1988), (3) a series of bulletins issued throughout 1989 by the nation's Department of Education to facilitate the transition to the decentralized administrative system, and (4) a newspaper's educational supplement reviewing decentralization during the week that the plan went into effect (Education times, 1989). As the discussion proceeds, it will become apparent that these sources provide only part of the material required for completely filling-in the model. A more thorough analysis

would require additional sources of information. What those sources might be will be indicated at appropriate junctures in the presentation.

A Descriptive Model of Decentralization

An assumption on which the following scheme is founded is that the key features of a decentralization proposal and of the reasons it has assumed the form it displays can be understood if answers are provided for a particular set of questions. The questions proposed for this purpose are ones focusing on interactions among:

(1) functions of the established centralized administrative system that have been selected for decentralization,

(2) factors motivating the decentralization proposal,

(3) the nature of the people involved with the decentralization issues,

(4) the competencies and facilities needed for efficiently performing the desired administrative functions of the decentralization proposal, and

(5) techniques to be used for evaluating the success of the decentralization plan.

The Setting of the New Zealand Case

As a backdrop for the following analysis, it is useful to begin with a brief description of the setting in which the New Zealand decentralization program has occurred. In 1987, when the nation's problems of administering schools were accorded particularly serious official attention, the country's population of 3.4 million was being served by: (1) 2,465 preschools and childcare centers; (2) 2,355 primary schools; (3) 88 mixed primary/secondary schools; (3) 281 secondary schools; and (4) 7 universities, 22 technical institutes and junior colleges, and 6 teachers colleges (Picot, 1988, pp. 10-19, 114).

As a culmination to a long series of complaints from many sources about deficiencies in the nation's system for administering schools, the government in mid-1987 established a taskforce to review education administration. The taskforce was comprised of five members. Two —including the chairman, Brian Picot— were prominent business leaders. Two others were from education faculties. The fifth was a Maori social researcher representing the country's indigenous Polynesians.

The taskforce was assigned to examine the functions of the existing highly centralized administrative structure and to recommend whatever changes the group deemed desirable. The taskforce's findings, published in April 1988 and commonly referred to as the Picot Report, featured a radical plan for decentralizing educational administration. In August 1988, Minister of Education David Lange issued the government's response to the Picot study under the title *Tomorrow's Schools*, indicating that the government accepted nearly all of the recommendations of the taskforce. The decentralization program was scheduled to take effect October 1, 1989. This allowed only 15 months for the necessary preparations. The following description of the decentralization process is organized according to the five elements of the model outlined abov

1. The Administrative Functions Being Decentralized

Apparently no decentralization plan ever involves relocating all decision-making aspects of an education system. Only selected portions are to be altered. Such alterations may involve (A) removing tasks from a central agency and assigning them to existing peripheral agencies or (B) assigning tasks to newly created agencies or (C) both A and B. Answering the two questions listed below provides an analyst an initial orientation to the administrative domain involved in the decentralization plan.

Question 1.1 Which aspects of the education system are to be decentralized, and which are not?

In the New Zealand case, the changes were massive, involving most educational decision-making. Responsibilities removed from the central Department of Education and assigned to individual schools include those of: (1) defining the relationships to be developed between each school and its community, (2) defining the specific learning objectives to be pursued at each grade level, (3) setting the school's budget, (4) selecting staff members, (5) setting any staff members' pay above a nationally-determined minimum level, (6) evaluating the performance of staff members, (7) hiring and firing the principal, teachers, and auxiliary personnel, (8) ordering and maintaining facilities and supplies from whatever sources local school authorities deem appropriate, (9) hiring professional consultants from whatever sources local authorities consider suitable, and (10) ensuring

that parents abide by the legislative provisions for compulsory school attendance (ages 6 and 15). Parents were also to have far greater freedom in deciding where their children will attend school. Furthermore, the numbers and types of schools that will comprise a local "district" were to be negotiated at the local level, although with the approval of the Ministry of Education.

Responsibilities to remain in the hands of the central authority include those of: (1) formulating broadscale national policies to foster educational equity (for women, Maoris, Pacific Islanders, and other minority-status groups), (2) defining codes of conduct for individual schools' trustees and principals, (3) setting nationwide curriculum objectives, (4) funding schools on the basis of nationally determined formulae (providing a bulk grant plus teachers' pay that is disbursed through separate payroll procedures), and (5) periodically assessing schools' performance by means of a newly created review and audit office.

Question 1.2 Which organizational units are to be involved in the change? That is, which functions are to be removed from which central agencies and assigned to which decentralized agencies?

Figures 1 and 2 depict the elements of the nation's pre- and post-decentralization structure and the authority relationships among these elements. The term "revolutionary" describes the difference between the pre- and post-decentralization eras. Before October 1989, the structure was highly centralized, complex, bureaucratic, and hierarchical. Figure 1 offers a sketchy version of that structure. The diagram, while overly simplified, does provide an impression of the series of stations through which all manner of decisions regarding a school's functions had to pass. In the case of primary schools, the route extended from the central Department of Education Head Office, through a regional office, through a subregion education board, to a school committee, and finally to the individual school. And in many cases, decisions about relatively minor matters began with the Minister before descending through the several stations. Rulings affecting secondary schools were slightly less cumbersome, since communications went directly to a school from its board of governors. The preschool and higher-education administrative systems, not detailed in Figure 1, differed in kind but not in complexity.

(Editor: Insert Figures 1 & 2 about here.)

The principal features of the decentralized structure recommended in the Picot Report and adopted by the government are pictured in Figure 2. The central Department of Education was abolished, replaced by a Ministry of Education assigned "to provide policy advice to the Minister on all aspects of education, and to oversee the implementation of national policies approved by the Minister. It will not be a direct provider of education services [as was true of the traditional Department of Education], although it will contract other agencies and individuals to provide certain services" (Lange, 1988, p. 19).

The regional Department of Education offices, the regional education boards, and the school committees that had formed the vertical linkages in the traditional system were wiped out in the decentralization move. Nearly all of their previous functions, along with those of the head office of the Department of Education, were henceforth to be performed by a new creation —a board of trustees for each individual school. In this board are vested virtually all of the responsibilities listed above as aspects of the education system that were decentralized. Each board is comprised of parents and professional educators belonging to the community served by the institution.

2. Factors Motivating the Decentralization Proposal

There are various reasons people propose to decentralize educational functions. Sometimes the primary motive is political, with decentralization representing an attempt of central authorities to pacify regional political powers who threaten the unity of the national state. In these instances, the central government relinquishes a measure of educational decision-making to local bodies as a symbol of the central authorities' respect for the rights and competence of regional leaders. In other cases, decentralization is a means of freeing the central government from responsibility, as can occur when the funding of schools is delegated to local governments. In still other instances, the purpose is to enhance the efficiency of the education system by improving the speed and accuracy of communication, of decision-making, and of implementing decisions. A fourth motive can be that of adapting the education system to the unique needs of different communities. A fifth can be to engage people at the grass roots of the society in assuming responsibility for education in

their community rather than their depending solely on the central government.

Frequently the ultimate reason for shifting control from the center to the periphery is to enhance schooling outcomes, that is, to improve the quality of graduates, to improve school attendance, and to adjust the curriculum to the local culture. And even when the primary motive is to pacify regional political groups or to shift financial responsibility to local bodies, it is typically assumed that the quantity and quality of graduates of the education system will not suffer from decentralization. In effect, virtually every decentralization scheme presumes that the outcomes of schooling will be improved, or at least be no worse than in the past.

In the New Zealand case, the expressed motives were to increase administrative efficiency, to accommodate for regional and minority groups' needs, and, in doing so, to improve the quality of student achievement. The more precise nature of these intentions is reflected in the answers to the following two questions.

Question 2.1 What reasons are given by proponents of decentralization for instituting their plan? In other words, what shortcomings of the existing centralized structure is the decentralization plan intended to correct?

The taskforce assigned to assess New Zealand's administrative procedures sought appraisals of the system from a broad range of individuals and organizations, resulting in the compilation of over 700 appraisals. From these submissions, taskforce members summarized under five themes the principal factors motivating them to propose decentralization. Each theme represented a cluster of shortcomings of the existing system (Picot, 1988, pp. 22-37):

(1) Overcentralization of decision-making that created (a) problems of distance and slowness in communicating and acting on matters affecting the operation of schools, (b) the vulnerability of the central office to pressure-group politics that placed minority groups at a disadvantage, (c) excessive involvement of the minister of education in minor inquiries, and (d) excessive dependence of parents and local school personnel on central decision-making.

(2) Undue complexity of the administrative structure leading to (a) fragmentation of educational sectors and (b) duplication of services.

(3) Lack of information and choice for both school staff and parents.

(4) Inefficient management practices, including (a) blurred responsibilities of departments, (b) lack of priorities at the center, (c) lack of accountability, (d) rule-bound procedures, (e) cross-cutting lines of authority that permitted one sector to block actions of other sectors, and (f) few incentives to manage effectively.

(5) Feelings of powerlessness on the part of six groups of people: (a) those who did not understand the system, (b) ones who claimed that the system was designed to favor a particular group of people, (c) those alienated by the system's failing them in the past, (d) ones who held different perspectives from that of the majority, (e) parents who wished to engage actively in their children's education but were prevented from doing so by inflexible procedures, and (f) teachers who felt the system stifled initiative.

To correct this array of unsatisfactory conditions, the taskforce determined that:

> Tinkering with the system will not be sufficient to achieve the improvements now required. In our view the time has come for quite radical change, particularly to reduce the number of decision points between the central provision of policy, funding, and services and the education delivered by the school or institution (Picot, 1988, p. 36).

Thus, from the perspective of the taskforce, decentralization should not relieve the central government of responsibility to fund the schools and prepare general policies but, rather, should improve the speed and quality of decision-making and implementation, should adapt schools to local needs, and should empower people at the grass-roots level to provide the kind of education they want for themselves and their children.

Question 2.2 What are the chief improvements that supporters of decentralization expect to result from their plan?

Improvements envisaged by the taskforce and the Minister of Education include (Picot, 1988, pp. 98-99; Lange, 1988, pp. 25-26):

(1) Parents, learners, and the local public will enjoy far greater opportunity to influence the kind and quality of education offered in the community. "We consider our proposals will lead to a more culturally sensitive system which is able to respond flexibly to minority group needs."

(2) The overall standard of educational achievement will improve.

(3) Purchasing practices will become more efficient as individual schools are free to contract goods and services from suppliers of their choosing "and this is likely to result in a higher proportion of the education budget being spent locally. Such a change will have considerable value for local economies at a time when economic activity in smaller regional communities is under pressure or declining."

(4) Because so many decisions can now be made at the local level, action will be taken more promptly and can be better adapted to local conditions than was often the case under the centralized structure.

3. The People Involved with the Decentralization Issues

Since a decentralization plan is the result of negotiations among individuals and groups, comprehending why a decentralization scheme has assumed its particular shape requires an understanding of the people engaged in its formulation. The types of information about these individuals and groups that is perhaps most helpful in explaining why the scheme has taken its final form are (a) their assigned and assumed positions or roles, (b) their motives and intentions, (c) their degrees of power, (d) their skills or expertise, and (e) their support of, or opposition to, the decentralization plan.

Question 3.1 Who have been the actors in the decentralization negotiations?

For convenience of discussion, it is useful to divide the decentralization process into two phases —(1) formulating a decentralization proposal and (2) implementing it. In New Zealand, the formulation phase consisted of the taskforce assessing the existing administrative system and of the government issuing a plan founded on the taskforce recommendations. The implementation phase consisted of the government's putting the new plan into effect.

Phase 1: Assessment and Formulation. It is apparent that many people were involved in

the assessment and formulation phase. As noted earlier, to prepare its report, the taskforce gathered information from more than 700 sources, including over 400 organizations and nearly 300 individuals (Picot, 1988, pp. 116-130). After the report was made public, Minister of Education David Lange and his staff "sought a response to the report both from the general public and educationalists [by] . . . conducting a series of inquiries throughout the country. More than 20,000 responses to the report have been studied. The need for reform was generally accepted" (Lange, 1988, pp. iii-iv).

Attempts to understand in any depth the complex reactions of so many respondents would require "inside" information, that is, information to which only the taskforce and Minister of Education's staff would be privy. Although it is not possible for outside observers to judge precisely the opinions expressed by the thousands of people involved in the decentralization issues, there is sufficient evidence available in public documents and newspaper accounts for us to speculate about the attitudes that were probably held by several types of respondents —staff members of the Department of Education, school-board members, representatives of minority groups, parents, school principals, teachers, and politicians in high-level government posts.

Department of Education Staff Members. Because so many administrative decisions and services were traditionally located out in the Department of Education's headquarters and regional offices, the hundreds of professionals working in the Department could hardly be pleased with the prospect of decentralization, since it would mean they not only would lose power and prestige but even their livelihood. However, any opinions they expressed about keeping the centralized system intact obviously carried little weight in comparison to the collective opinions of the other groups that contributed to the assessment.

School Board Members. Like employees in the Department of Education,the professionals staffing the regional school boards could be expected to oppose the decentralization, since the plan would eliminate school boards.

Minority Groups. Maoris, Pacific Islanders, and other minority-status groups would generally support the proposed changes, since decentralization would give them more power than in the past to fashion educational services to suit their desires.

Parents. A large proportion of parents could be counted on to support decentralization, since the plan provided them more control over schools and greater freedom to chose where their children would be educated.

Principals. Under decentralization, the job of school principals would be significantly changed. Principals would now be required to make more decisions than before, which could mean more problems to solve. However, decentralization would also mean greater freedom to determine how their school operated. Hence, although their responsibilities would greater, most would likely support decentralization because it increased their power and control.

Teachers. Among the educational roles affected by the decentralization plan, the instructional role of teachers would be the one least modified. In other words, decentralization was not aimed at changing teaching procedures. However, because teachers could serve on a school's board of trustees and would have easy access to board members who charted the school's aims and provided services, a large proportion of teachers might be expected to support decentralization.

Politicians in Government Posts. The decentralization plan clearly appealed to political leaders, as shown by the promptness with which the decentralization legislation passed. Much of the appeal of the plan for politicians was its promise to serve their constituents more adequately, since the plan would to place more power in the hands of local communities and minority groups on whose favor political leaders depended. A further appealing feature was the promise that a substantial saving of funds would be achieved by the elimination of personnel and facilities that comprised the existing administrative hierarchy.

Phase 2: Implementation. The key actors required for implementing the decentralization program have been: (1) members of the boards of trustees for each institution, (2) school principals, (3) Ministry of Education staff members, and (4) the personnel of three new administrative agencies. In addition, somewhat more responsibility has also devolved on teachers.

Boards of Trustees. In theory at least, the greatest power of decision under the decentralization scheme is held by each school's board of trustees. Under the plan

proposed in the Minister of Education's response to the Picot Report, each board at the primary and secondary level would consist of: (1) five members elected by parents of students, (2) the school principal, (3) one member elected by the teaching staff from among their number, (3) one from the student body elected by the students in secondary schools, and (4) "such other co-opted members as the board of trustees thinks fit (up to a maximum number of 4), to ensure that the board properly reflects the composition of its community, or to ensure that particular expertise is represented and available to the board. No more than one of these co-opted members will be a teacher employed by the board" (Lange, 1988, pp. 7-8).

School Principals. As the managing director of the school, the principal carries responsibilities not only for directing the instructional functions of the institution but also for a good many tasks formerly carried out, in whole or in part, by agencies higher in the administrative structure, such as selecting teachers, creating budgets, and devising a statement of the school's mission.

Ministry of Education Personnel. The tasks assigned to the Ministry have been those of advising the government on education and training policies, overseeing the "efficient and equitable implementation" of policies, and ensuring the optimal use of resources (Education times, 1989, p. 21). The Ministry has 10 divisions in its central location and 11 district offices. Several of the functions which the Picot Report had assigned to local trustees were, in subsequent legislation, relocated in the Ministry. Therefore, the central government has retained a significant measure of power through its supervisory functions and its ability to veto local decisions judged to be improper. [This retention of monitoring power prompted some observers to dub the new system as *recentralization* plan.]

New Central Units. Three newly created central agencies have been an Education Review Office to replace the school inspectorate, an Early Childhood Development Unit, and a Special Education Service to furnish support services for learners with special needs. [In August 1989, as the Department of Education was being eliminated, a total of 1,629 employees of the Department were given their dismissal notices. An undetermined number of them would find new jobs in the Ministry or on the staffs of the three new administrative

units (Education times, 1989, p. 19)]. The Education Review Office would wield significant power through its function of periodically assessing the operation of the individual schools, with the term "operation" covering the instructional program, administrative procedures, and the use of facilities.

4. The Required Competencies and Facilities

Crucial to the success of an administrative change is the ability of the education system to provide the needed physical facilities and to furnish personnel who are competent to operate the program efficiently. Thus, the analysis of a decentralization proposal can properly include consideration of what facilities and competencies the plan requires as well as the likelihood that personnel with such competencies will be forthcoming. The following four question focus on these issues of personnel and facilities.

Question 5.1 What new personnel are required by the decentralization plan and what skills do they need to command?

The six main types of new personnel required by the New Zealand plan have been school trustees, school principals, Ministry staff members, special-services experts, evaluators, and outside consultants. The first of these types is the most difficult to provide. The other five already exist in some form, but in many cases they might need additional skills.

School Trustees. The crucial nature of boards of trustees is reflected in the role assigned to them in the government' decentralization plan:

> Institutions will be the basic "building block" of education administration, with control over their educational resources —to use as they determine, within overall guidelines for education set by the state. The running of the institution will be a partnership between the professionals and the particular community in which it is located. The mechanism for such a partnership will be a board of trustees. Each institution will set its own objectives, within the overall national guidelines set by the state. These objectives will reflect the particular needs of the community in which the institution is located, and will be clearly set out in a "charter" drawn up by the institution. This charter will act as a contract between the community and the institution, and the institution and the state (Lange, 1988, p. 1).

The demanding array of skills board members are expected to possess becomes apparent when the board's duties are listed. Board members are responsible for:

(1) creating a charter defining the purposes of the institution, the intended outcomes for students, and ways programs will be designed to suit students' interests, staff members' skills, and the wishes of the community.

(2) along with the school staff, setting the school's curriculum.

(3) appointing the principal and approving staff appointments.

(4) accounting to the community, through periodic reports, for the school's performance.

(5) maintaining and improving the school's physical plant.

(6) budgeting and accounting for the expenditure of bulk-grant funds from the central government.

(7) hiring outside administrative services.

School Principals As a key functionary on the board of trustees, the principal not only needs all of the competencies of a regular board member but also the skill to guide less experienced board members in performing their jobs. In addition to these business-management competencies, the principal is expected to be an educational leader, providing guidance and inspiration for the instructional staff in carrying out their teaching responsibilities.

Ministry staff members, special-services experts, and evaluators. In many ways the functions assigned to these personnel who staff the newly created central agencies require skills very similar to those required of staff members of the previous Department of Education. Therefore, the professionals who lost their jobs when the Department of Education was eliminated have formed an important source of personnel with the same or similar qualities as those required in the new agencies.

Outside consultants. Obviously, the types of competencies needed by consultants depend on the kinds of problems with which schools need aid. The kinds of consultants required for solving problems of record keeping and budgets are clearly not the same as those for the tasks of designing school buildings or diagnosing children's learning

problems. Under the old system, schools were usually obliged to accept personnel in the established administrative hierarchy for such consultant services. Under the new plan, each school can choose its own sources of consultants, thereby giving each board of trustees greater control over deciding what competencies are needed, where these are most likely found, and what price to pay.

Question 5.2 If the new personnel do not already possess the required skills and knowledge when they are appointed, what provision has been made to equip them with the competencies?

The people least prepared to assume their responsibilities have been the individual schools' trustees. Therefore, throughout 1989, as local boards were preparing to assume their duties, the Department of Education issued a wide range of materials intended to educate board members in how to carry out their assignments. One series of periodicals, entitled *Board of Trustees Newsletter* (Implementation Unit, 1989), explained in detail the elements of the decentralized system and their interrelationships, including the specific steps board members would typically take in carrying out their responsibilities. A sample *Charter Framework* was distributed as a model boards could follow as they formulated the charter for their particular school. The Department also furnished consultants to introduce trustees and principals to their new responsibilities. In effect, personnel in the Department of Education found themselves working hard to facilitate the transition to an administrative structure that would bring about their own demise.

Question 5.3 What facilities are required for operating the decentralization plan, how readily can these be provided, and what will be done with central facilities abandoned by the shift to the decentralized scheme?

Because the decentralization plan eliminated so many intermediate agencies in the link between the Minister of Education and the schools, there was no problem of requiring new facilities. New agencies could simply take over quarters vacated by agencies that were eliminated in the change. The problem, instead, was one of disposing of facilities that had been abandoned. In presenting the government's position regarding such facilities, Minister Lange (1988, p. 28) proposed that:

Businesses, property, and other assets owned by the Crown may be sold off to potential purchasers. Education Board and surplus departmental assets may be sold to former education board employees, departmental staff, and others who may wish to own these assets as a base for providing services to institutions.

5. Evaluating Decentralization

A final aspect warranting attention is the matter of what sorts of evidence are to be sought for assessing how well a decenralization plan is achieving its objectives and, at the same time, is not producing undesirable side effects.

Question 6.1 Which aspects of the education system are assessed for the purpose of appraising how well the decentralization program is achieving its purposes? Who conducts the evaluation and to what audience are the results of the assessment addressed?

For convenience of analysis, the modes of evaluating the new system can be divided into two types —formal and informal. The formal variety consists of the systematic collection and interpretation of data as required in the decentralization plan. The informal variety is comprised of people's opinions based on their casual observations rather than on systematic data-gathering.

Two sorts of formal assessment are required by the plan. The first involves periodic reports that each local board of trustees is obliged to prepare for the community it serves, reports that inform the public about how monies are being spent, the level of students' achievement, and the manner in which problems in the operation of the institution are being attacked. These assessments are carried out by local school personnel and board members, who may solicit outside experts to assist them in gathering information and interpreting it.

The second type consists of biannual assessments by a central government Review Agency. The evaluations are to be conducted by "multi-disciplinary teams with expertise in curriculum, financial and management support, equal employment opportunities, and equal educational opportunity" in order to "ensure that institutions are accountable for the government funds they spend and for meeting the objectives set out in their charter" (Lange, 1988, pp. 20-21). The results of these appraisals are reported to the Minister of Education who uses the information for monitoring the performance of the individual

institutions and for recommending remedies where shortcomings of educational operations are discovered. The results are also presented to local school authorities along with recommendations about how they might improve the efficiency of their institution.

In contrast to the two types of formal evaluation conducted by official agencies, informal evaluations are found in the opinions expressed by anyone in the society —opinions offered voluntarily or solicited by such people as journalists, school officials, politicians, or educators. Such appraisals achieve public significance when they are disseminated via mass communication media, principally through newspaper and magazine articles, radio and television "talk shows," political campaign literature, and general meetings of organizations. The five examples below illustrate the varied nature of such opinions and the diversity of their sources. The quotations are segments of opinions expressed on the day the decentralization scheme took effect, following the 15-month period of preparation for implementing the plan (Education times, 1989, pp. 20-21).

A Board of Trustees Chairwoman: "I remain critical of the minister of education for misleading parents over the extent to which they would influence their children's schools. There can be no influencing the national guidelines as these are non-discretionary requirements of our charters. . . . We can consult our community to distraction, but to translate this dialogue into a coherent and workable charter is devastatingly difficult. And yet . . . beyond the cynicism, the funding deficits, and in the information overload, I see teachers and trustees donating hours and effort to ensure that it is indeed our children who are Tomorrow's Schools beneficiaries."

Chief Executive, Review Agency: "It is a system in which the emphasis will be on achieving agreed objectives rather than merely observing bureaucratic rules."

Principal of a Catholic School: "We certainly have the shared vision of government, parents, and educators to produce challenging and successful learning environments. The question posed is whether or not these can be achieved with the same financial resources in the past, albeit in different hands. Will resourcefulness rather than resources be the means to survival?"

President of a Principals Association: "No one would deny the need to improve the competence of the administrative structure, but the reform process has not been noted for efficiency. The flood of inaccurate information, the changing of rules in some instances, and the conflicting statements about the funding of

schools have done little to inspire confidence among teachers and boards of trustees. . . . One wonders whether the whole exercise has been worth the cost."

President of a Trustees Association: "Nothing is going to be perfect at our first attempt. We have to adapt and improve as we progress. Funding appears to be our biggest problem at this time. The Government has rushed Tomorrow's Schools through with indecent haste, hoping everything would fall into place. . . . We can use the School Trustees Association to lobby the Government for more funding and for the many other overdue improvements to the system."

Conclusion

By mid-1990, it was too early to judge how well New Zealand's decentralization plan would ultimately achieve its objectives of enhancing administrative efficiency, improving students' achievement, accommodating for the needs of individuals and groups, and saving money. The decentralization plan was still in its early stage of "growing pains." As suggested by the informal appraisals quoted above, considerable frustration was being experienced by people at the receiving end of the decentralization plan —the trustees and staff members of individual institutions.

Two truisms appear to apply in the New Zealand case —"A system is only as good as the people operating it" and "Conflicts of interest do not disappear with a change in structure, so there will be continual need for negotiation and compromise in the attempt to approximate a delivery of services acceptable to the varied constituencies that use and support the education system."

References

Education times. (1989, October 1) *The Dominion Sunday Times*, pp. 19-21.

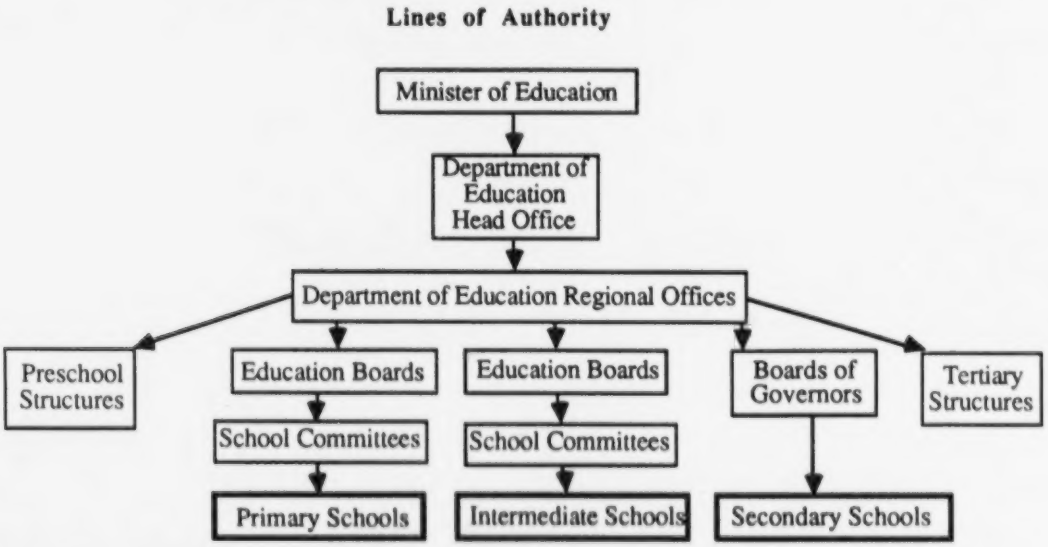
Implementation Unit (1989) *Board of Trustees Newsletter* (Wellington, Department of Education).

Lange, D. (1988) *Tomorrow's Schools* (Wellington, Government Printer).

Picot, B. (1988) *Administering for Excellence* (Wellington, Government Printer).

Figure 1

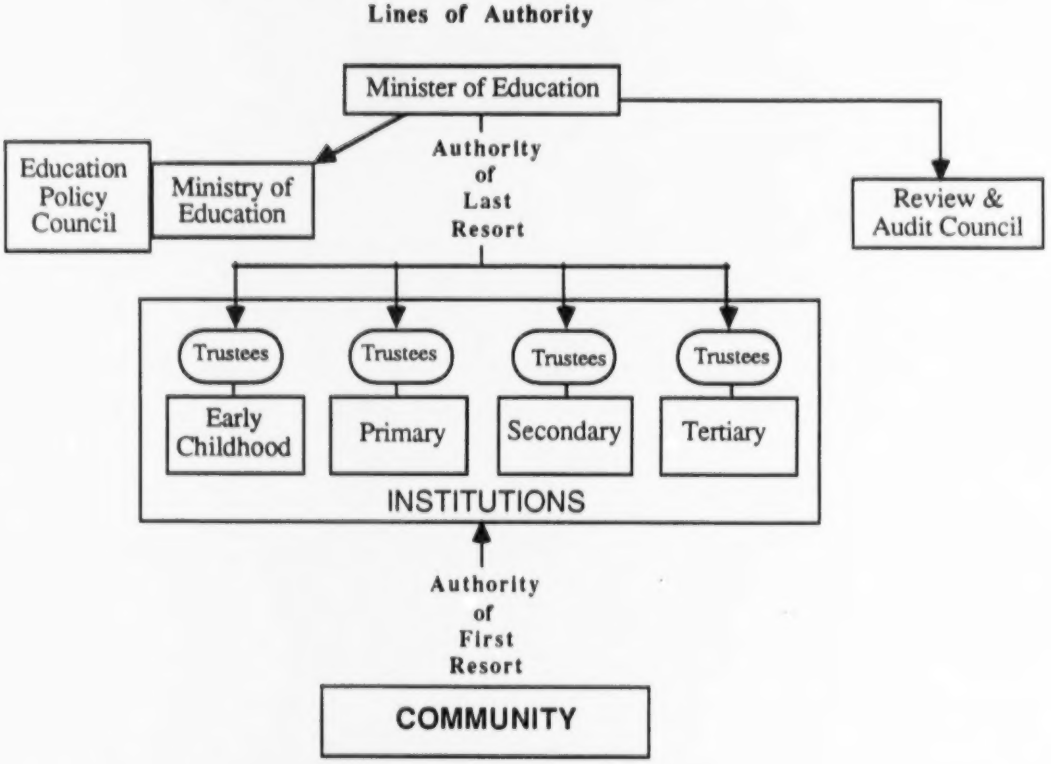
New Zealand's Educational Administration Structure — Before Decentralization



Source: B. Picot (1988) *Administering for Excellence*, p. 21.

Figure 2

New Zealand's Educational Administration Structure — After Decentralization



Source: B. Picot (1988) *Administering for Excellence*, p. 105.